WHERE THE PLOUGH MET THE STARS

WORKERS' ACTIVISM IN KILLARNEY, 1914–1940

TADGH QUILL-MANLEY

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Lodgings at Killarney.
(Photo source: National Library of Ireland)

CILL AIRNE

INTRODUCTION: TOWARDS A WORKERS' REPUBLIC

'*Where the Plough Met the Stars: Workers' Activism in Killarney, 1914-1940*' seeks to provide a general overview (though by no means a complete narrative or documentation) on the journey of workers' organisation and activism in the town of Killarney, south-east County Kerry. The history of labour in Ireland has often been told through the lens of great national events, urban centres, and well-known figures. Yet, the development of working-class organisation and consciousness was not confined to Dublin, Belfast, or Limerick. It also took root in smaller towns, where economic hardship, social inequality, and political upheaval intersected in ways that were both distinctive and deeply revealing. Killarney, more commonly associated with tourism and natural beauty, offers an important case study in this regard. Beneath its image as a picturesque destination lay a community marked by low wages, precarious employment, inadequate housing, and an increasingly assertive working class. Killarney had a history of labour agitation. For example, agricultural labourers had partaken in a strike in the summer of 1870.[1]

This study examines the emergence and evolution of labour activism in Killarney from the years at the commencement of the First World War, through the turbulent decades that followed. It seeks to recover the experiences of workers who organised, agitated, and, at times, confronted both local authorities and employers in pursuit of improved conditions and greater control over their lives. In doing so, it places Killarney within the broader context of Irish labour history, while also

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[1] *O'Connor, Emmet (1992). 'A Labour History of Ireland, 1824-1960.' Gill & MacMillan.*

emphasising the particular local dynamics that shaped its development.

The early twentieth century was a period of profound change in Ireland. Political movements for national independence coincided with growing demands for social and economic reform. For many workers, these struggles were inseparable. The promise of political freedom carried with it expectations of material improvement, yet these expectations were frequently unmet. In towns such as Killarney, workers faced rising costs of living, stagnant wages, and poor housing conditions. These realities provided the impetus for organisation, as labourers increasingly recognised the necessity of collective action.

The sources examined in this work - principally contemporary newspaper reports - offer a detailed account of these developments. Publications such as the '*Workers' Republic*,' the '*Irish Worker*,' and various local newspapers documented meetings, disputes, and campaigns, often with a clear editorial perspective. While these sources must be approached critically, they nonetheless provide invaluable insight into the concerns, strategies, and aspirations of organised labour in Killarney. They reveal not only the material grievances of workers, but also the language through which those grievances were articulated and contested.

A recurring theme in these accounts is the centrality of organisation. Trade unions, particularly the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union (IT&GWU), played a crucial role in mobilising workers across different sectors. Efforts to establish local branches, recruit members, and form a Trades and Labour Council were met with both enthusiasm and resistance. Meetings held in halls, public spaces, and workplaces became sites of political education as well as

mobilisation. Speakers emphasised unity, discipline, and the need for workers to assert their rights in the face of economic exploitation, as well as social and political marginalisation. As former cabinet Minister and MEP, Barry Desmond, points out in '*No Workers' Republic!*' Killarney was one of the locations in which the IT&GWU gained a notable foothold in the years following its foundation. He also points to Killarney as one of the districts to have a notable local trades council.[2]

At the same time, labour activism in Killarney was shaped by its relationship with local governance. The Urban District Council emerged as a key arena in which the interests of workers were contested. Issues such as housing, wages for municipal employees, and public works projects brought organised labour into direct engagement with elected representatives. Workers sought not only to influence policy, but also to secure representation within these bodies. The election of labour candidates to the Council marked an important step in this process, reflecting a broader trend towards political participation by the working class.

The tensions between labour and capital are evident throughout the period under study. Employers, including prominent local figures, often resisted demands for higher wages or improved conditions. Disputes over pay, working hours, and union recognition led to strikes and, in some cases, more radical forms of action. The occupation of workplaces, as seen in the sawmill "Soviet," illustrates the extent to which workers were willing to challenge existing power structures when conventional negotiations failed. Such actions, while relatively rare, highlight the

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[2] *Desmond, Barry (2009). 'No Workers' Republic! Reflections on Labour and Ireland, 1913-1967.' Watchword Press.*

influence of wider revolutionary currents and the willingness of workers to experiment with alternative forms of organisation.

It is also important to recognise the broader social dimensions of labour activism in Killarney. Housing conditions, in particular, were a persistent source of grievance. Reports of overcrowded, unsanitary dwellings and delays in the construction of new housing schemes underscored the inadequacy of existing provision. Workers and their representatives repeatedly called for reform, linking the issue of housing to wider questions of public health, dignity, and social justice. Similarly, concerns about food prices, unemployment, and access to land for cultivation reflect the interconnected nature of economic hardship during this period.

The period from 1914 to the early 1920s was marked by war, revolution, and the eventual establishment of the Irish Free State. These events had a profound impact on labour activism in Killarney. Wartime inflation exacerbated existing inequalities, while political instability created both opportunities and challenges for organised labour. The relationship between labour and nationalist movements was complex, with moments of cooperation as well as tension. While some labour activists prioritised parliamentary separation, others emphasised the need for social transformation, arguing that administrative separation alone would not address the conditions faced by workers.

Interestingly, the the Irish Citizen's Army (ICA), led by James Connolly, would establish a branch in Killarney, despite it being otherwise based almost entirely in Dublin, with other units in Cork, Waterford, and Co. Monaghan. The ICA, described by Vladimir Lenin as

the first "red army" in Europe, would later align with members of the Irish Volunteers to form the Irish Republican Army (IRA).[3] [4] This shows that a revolutionary republican spirit for the economic liberty of workers' was present in the town.

By the 1930s, the context had shifted once again. Economic depression brought renewed hardship, and the momentum of earlier labour activism appeared to wane in some respects. Nevertheless, the legacy of previous struggles remained evident. Workers continued to organise, albeit under more constrained circumstances, and the issues that had animated earlier campaigns - wages, housing, and working conditions - remained unresolved.

This work does not seek to present a linear or uncomplicated narrative of progress. Rather, it highlights the uneven and contested nature of labour activism in Killarney. Periods of mobilisation were followed by setbacks, and gains were often partial or temporary. Yet, the persistence of workers in organising and asserting their interests is a defining feature of this history.

By focusing on Killarney, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of Irish labour history. It demonstrates that the struggle for workers' rights was not confined to major industrial centres, but was a nationwide phenomenon shaped by local conditions and experiences. In recovering this history, it becomes possible to appreciate the complexity of the labour

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[3] *'Irish Citizen Army'. The Irish War.* https://www.theirishwar.com/organizations/irish-citizen-army/

[4] *'THE IRA: 1919 TO 1968.' Alpha History.* https://alphahistory.com/northernireland/ira-1919-1968/

movement and the diverse forms it took across different regions.

This work was undertaken as an independent 'hobby' project by a student working within the practical limits of time, access, and available resources. It does not claim to provide a definitive or exhaustive account of labour activism in Killarney, but rather an informed exploration based primarily on sources that were accessible at the time, particularly contemporary newspapers. While every effort has been made to ensure accuracy in the transcription, interpretation, and presentation of these materials, the possibility of minor errors or omissions cannot be entirely excluded, especially given the limitations of source availability and the challenges inherent in working with historical records. The study has been approached in good faith, with care taken to represent sources faithfully and to avoid deliberate distortion. Readers are therefore encouraged to view this work as a contribution to ongoing discussion, rather than a final authority. Constructive criticism is welcome, but should be made with an appreciation of the context in which the work was produced and the intention behind it: to recover and highlight aspects of local working-class history that might otherwise remain overlooked.

The Killarney Urban District Council (UDC) would be a lobbying target for organised workers in the town.
(Photo source: National Library of Ireland)

LABOUR IN A TIME OF UPHEAVAL, 1914-1929

In late May 1914, the '*Irish Worker*' reported that the Co-operative Congress for the Co-operative Union of Great Britain and Ireland was being hosted in the city of Dublin, from Whitsuntide (first Sunday after Easter), and would feature a trip of delegates to Killarney. The article stated that the educational work of the Congress had been carried out in conjunction with a joint demonstration with the Workers' Educational Association on the Saturday afternoon. It noted that the speakers on that occasion had included Miss Maxwell; the Rev. R. M. Gwynn of Trinity College; Prof. Powicke of Queen's University, Belfast; Prof. Hall of Belfast Technical College; Mr. W. H. Watkins of Plymouth; and Mr. Alfred Mansbridge, M.A., of the Workers' Educational Association. It further reported that a special educational session had been held on the Tuesday evening. At that session, the article recorded that addresses had been delivered by Father Finlay on "Co-operation in Agriculture" and by Mr. T. W. Allen, Director of the C.W.S., on "Distributive Co-operation." It also noted that Father Finlay had opened a Congress discussion on "Co-operation and the Increased Cost of Living," while Mr. George Russell ("A.E.") had opened discussion on the relationships between agricultural, distributive, and productive societies. The article went on to state that a special excursion to Killarney had been arranged for the Thursday that week. It further observed that the proceedings of the Congress were expected to be followed with interest by every Irish worker, whether or not they were already co-operators, and that delegates could expect a warm welcome in Dublin. Finally, the article expressed the hope that the work of the Congress would prove fruitful and would hasten the establishment in Ireland and the sister

kingdoms of a Co-operative Commonwealth, which it described as having been an inspiration to great Irish patriots of the past and as the goal towards which the efforts of Irish workers had been directed.[5]

In an edition from November 1914, the '*Irish Worker*' outlined that, in a demonstration of organised labour's influence on public policy in early twentieth-century Ireland, the Tralee Trades Council, North Kerry, brought the question of concrete-built housing before its members at a recent meeting. The council ultimately passed a resolution disapproving of such constructions and ordered that a copy be forwarded to the Killarney Urban District Council, which had recently been considering the matter in relation to a proposed scheme of artisans' dwellings. According to the paper, the stance of the Tralee Trades Council, rooted in the practical expertise of workers in the building trades, was presented as deserving serious consideration not only by Killarney Urban District Council, but by any public body engaged in the provision of working-class housing. Central to the council's argument was the contention that while concrete houses might appear less costly to erect than traditional brick or masonry dwellings, their long-term expense proved greater. Critics pointed to persistent defects arising from dampness, noting that rainwater percolated more readily through concrete walls, rather than through conventional construction. Such conditions, they argued, rendered the dwellings unhealthy for inhabitants while also reducing the amount of employment generated during their construction. Contemporary observers commended the trades council's intervention (seeking to influence Killarney), expressing hope that public bodies across County Kerry would lend their support to the resolution. The episode

[5] *Irish Worker 30/5/1914*

reflects broader early-century debates over housing standards, the role of organised labour in shaping municipal policy, and the tension between cost-saving construction methods and the demands of durability, health, and local employment.[6]

Under the heading 'Organising,' the '*Workers' Republic*' reported in December 1915 that Councillor Partridge had addressed a large and well-attended public meeting in Killarney town on a Friday, and had also spoken at a gathering of the Fenit branch on the following Sunday. The article noted that, on the latter occasion, his movements were closely monitored by authorities, stating that he was followed by a local police officer, described in the report as a "G-man," along with two additional policemen and a government note-taker. It further recorded that he was met by police at Kilfenora, where the meeting took place in a hall, an arrangement which the article's writer suggested had disappointed the authorities. The newspaper adopted a critical tone towards what it characterised as excessive policing of such events, and suggested that government officials, including Matthew Nathan, might instead have directed police resources towards other matters, such as maintaining public order among soldiers.[7]

The '*Workers' Republic*' reported on a public meeting held in Killarney on 17 December 1915 under the auspices of local trade and labour organisations, at which workers were urged to join the ranks of organised labour. The gathering was described as highly successful, with a large attendance both inside and outside the Town Hall. According to the report, Mr. Thomas O'Gorman, President of the Trades and Labour

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[6] *Irish Worker 7/11/1914*

[7] *Workers Republic 25/12/1915*

Council, was elected to the chair and received an enthusiastic reception from the assembled crowd. In his address, he stated that he had travelled from Tralee to encourage the workers of Killarney to organise in order to protect themselves from what he described as worsening economic conditions, including the threat of poverty. He also referred to the possibility of conscription, arguing that it posed a serious danger to workers and should be resisted. The newspaper recorded that he advocated for the establishment of a branch of the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union in Killarney, which, in conjunction with existing unions, could facilitate the organisation of skilled trades and the formation of a local Trades and Labour Council. As an illustration of the benefits of organisation, he cited the ongoing dispute between the Drapers' Association in Tralee and the Munster Warehouse Company, emphasising that sustained resistance would not have been possible without collective organisation. The article further reported that Mr. O'Connell, Secretary of the Tralee Trades Council, was warmly received and delivered a detailed address on the development of trade unionism. He outlined how trade unions had historically been associated with skilled workers, who had, through sustained effort and sacrifice, built effective organisations for their protection. He argued that similar progress was now being made among unskilled labourers and that, with improved organisation, education, and unity, workers could achieve greater collective power. He emphasised the growing momentum of the labour movement, noting that increasing numbers of men and women were joining unions in response to low wages, long working hours, and poor conditions. The report highlighted his assertion that workers should actively recruit others and counter negative portrayals of trade unions in sections of the press. He concluded by urging workers in the town to strengthen their position through

organisation, arguing that only by doing so could they effectively defend their wages and improve their living conditions. Councillor Partridge, who was introduced by the chair, was also reported to have addressed the meeting. He referred to criticisms made of him in the press, particularly accusations linking him to militant labour activism, and suggested that such portrayals were politically motivated. In his speech, he contrasted economic conditions in Ireland and England, claiming that English workers were receiving higher wages and that economic activity there was expanding, while in Ireland unemployment was increasing and businesses were struggling. He argued that Irish trade was being transferred to England and criticised sections of the press for failing to challenge this situation. He also referred to contemporary political debates, expressing scepticism regarding the implementation of Home Rule and suggesting that labour activists were striving for broader national and social change. The newspaper recorded that Partridge went on to address labour conditions in Ireland more generally, urging the workers of Killarney to establish a local Trades and Labour Council and to co-operate with similar organisations across the country. He reiterated opposition to conscription, arguing that it should be resisted, and claimed that Ireland was contributing disproportionately to the war effort relative to its population. He concluded by thanking the audience for their attendance and acknowledging the contribution of a local band to the success of the meeting, expressing the hope that future gatherings would be held under the auspices of an established Killarney Trades and Labour Council. The meeting concluded with remarks from the chair, who thanked those present for their attendance. The newspaper noted that large crowds gathered at the railway station as the speakers departed for Tralee, where they were given a send-off marked by

enthusiastic cheering and expressions of nationalist sentiment.[8]

The '*Workers' Republic*' newspaper also reported in January that a well-attended and enthusiastic meeting had been held in the Volunteer Hall on the 11th of the month, with the aim of establishing a branch of the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union in Killarney and taking initial steps towards the formation of a local Trades and Labour Council. Although the meeting had not been widely advertised and was convened at short notice, a substantial number of attendees were said to have been present, including representatives of several trade unions. According to the report, those in attendance included officials from a range of organised trades, such as bricklayers, asylum workers, drapers' assistants, painters, and bakers. On the proposal of one attendee, seconded by another, Mr. Buckley was elected to chair the meeting. In his opening remarks, he thanked those present and outlined the purpose of the gathering, before introducing Mr. M. J. O'Connor, Vice-President of the Tralee Trades Council and Secretary of the Tralee Workers' Union, who had been invited to address the meeting. The newspaper recorded that Mr. O'Connor was received with applause and spoke at length on the condition of workers. He stated that the meeting had a dual purpose: to establish a local branch of the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union and to initiate the creation of a Trades and Labour Council in Killarney. He argued that the conditions of workers, particularly the unskilled, were poor, citing low wages, long working hours, and unhealthy working environments. He further noted the sharp rise in the cost of living since the outbreak of the war, observing that the prices of essential goods such as flour and coal had increased significantly, while wages

[8] *Workers Republic 1/1/1916*

had largely remained unchanged. Even where bonuses had been granted, he suggested, they were insufficient to meet rising costs. In addition to wages, O'Connor was reported to have highlighted the importance of working and living conditions, including the need for properly ventilated and sanitary workplaces, as well as access to decent housing at reasonable rents. The article emphasised his argument that merely discussing grievances was insufficient, and that effective action was required to address them. He presented "unity and organisation" as the principal remedy, urging workers to join together through collective structures. The report noted that he encouraged both skilled and semi-skilled workers to join the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union, describing it as an Irish-run organisation that had already achieved positive results elsewhere. He also stressed that a local branch would operate with a degree of autonomy, allowing members to manage their own affairs. The article further recorded his criticism of extremely low wages in Killarney, including claims that some unskilled workers earned as little as ten shillings per week, which he described as unacceptable. He also addressed the position of workers employed by the Urban Council, suggesting that their situation could be improved through greater organisation and representation. O'Connor was reported to have concluded by calling for the development of stronger labour representation within local government, arguing that a Trades and Labour Council could help unify workers, shape public opinion, and secure the election of representatives committed to labour interests. The meeting concluded with a vote of thanks to the chair. The newspaper noted that approximately sixty individuals subsequently registered their intention to join the Irish Transport Workers' Union, and that arrangements were made for a further meeting. It also reported that a separate conference of delegates from various trade societies

had taken place, at which concrete steps were agreed towards the establishment of the Killarney Trades and Labour Council.[9]

A person under the pseudonym 'Lough Lein,' contributing to the '*Workers' Republic*' in late January 1916, expressed approval of what it described as a growing awareness among the workers of Killarney town of their own interests and future welfare, particularly highlighting their recognition of the importance of unity. It noted that working conditions in the town had long been difficult and suggested that there had been a pressing need for some form of labour organisation for many years. The article was sharply critical of the Urban Council, observing that as early as 1913 it had secured a grant of £6,500 for the construction of working-class housing. However, by January 1916, the report claimed that only part of the scheme had been completed, with the remainder postponed until after the war. The newspaper attributed this failure to what it characterised as the composition of the council, alleging that it included slum owners and others who spoke publicly in support of workers while failing to provide fair wages. It further suggested that some councillors were motivated by electoral considerations rather than genuine concern for labourers. The report also accused members of the council of favouritism and patronage in appointments. It alleged that several official roles - including those of Sanitary Inspector, Hackney Car Inspector, and Shop Act Inspector - had been assigned to the son of one councillor, while the position of rate collector was held by a relative of another. It further claimed that, when difficulties arose in fulfilling these duties, additional appointments were made in an ad hoc manner, including the reassignment of an unemployment officer

[9] *Workers Republic 22/1/1916*

who already held multiple positions. The article also pointed to the appointment of a councillor's relative as Deputy Town Surveyor, suggesting that such practices were widespread.[10]

In early February 1916, the '*Workers' Republic*' newspaper questioned whether the local Distress Committee was still in operation and, if so, called on it to account for a grant it had received in the previous year for street improvements in the town. It asked why these funds had not been expended and speculated, somewhat sarcastically, that they might have been invested in the War Loan. The article suggested that such matters had been neglected due to the preoccupation of the committee's chairman, Mr. Eugene O'Sullivan, a former Member of Parliament (MP), with the appointment of a Town Clerk. It further claimed that O'Sullivan had been disappointed by the withdrawal of the clerk's resignation, implying that he had sought to influence the appointment process. The report also criticised him for having allegedly stated publicly that he had never supported an increase in wages for working men, and urged that he instead ensure that workers employed at the Killarney Mineral Water Factory received what it described as a living wage. The column, titled 'Killarney Notes,' also referred to a motion proposed by Councillor Ahearn regarding the feeding of the poor, questioning what had become of it and expressing scepticism about his effectiveness despite his apparent philanthropic stance. In addition, the article criticised Councillor Shea for remarks directed at the local branch of the Irish Transport Workers' Union. It suggested that his position on the Urban Council was insecure and implied that he

[10] *Workers Republic 29/1/1916*

might face electoral consequences in January 1917. The piece concluded under the pseudonym 'Lough Lein.'[11]

In a column titled 'Killarney Notes' (under the pseudonym of 'Lough Lein') the '*Workers' Republic*' newspaper reported on 12 February 1916 that the workers of Killarney town had recently made significant progress, noting in particular the formation of a Trade and Labour Council during that week. It suggested that the Council would be required to address a range of issues, including opposition to those whom the writer accused of professing public support for workers while, in practice, accumulating profits and disregarding both legal and moral obligations. The article argued that the period was an opportune moment for workers and their allies - where such allies existed within local public bodies - to secure funding through official estimates for proposed public works. Attention was also drawn to the case of Peter Huggard, described as a self-styled "ratepayers' champion," who was reported to have received compensation for the burning of one of his properties, which he attributed to the actions of "suffragettes." The newspaper characterised the property as a slum and noted that it had been repeatedly criticised by the local Medical Inspector. It further alleged that local civic authorities had failed to act on these reports, suggesting that this inaction was due to Huggard's connections with them. The tone of the piece implied that he might yet face consequences in the future. The report also described the re-establishment of the local Distress Committee, which had revived under the slogan "Keep the Home Fires Burning." Despite having received a substantial quantity of firewood in November, the committee was said to be divided over how best to distribute it, and had reportedly failed to reach a decision after several

[11] *Workers Republic 5/2/1916*

meetings. The article expressed scepticism as to whether the intended recipients would benefit, suggesting instead that distribution might favour those with influence. Finally, the newspaper criticised local shopkeepers who were said to be employing cheap or strike-breaking labour, warning that such practices could ultimately harm their businesses.[12]

In another column titled 'Killarney Notes,' the '*Workers' Republic*' newspaper reported under the pseudonym 'Lough Lein' on 4 March 1916 that Councillor Partridge had held a highly successful meeting in the town on the previous Sunday. It suggested that those who remained outside the ranks of labour organisation should join their respective unions, emphasising that, as Partridge had explained to his audience, nothing could be achieved without unity. The article further speculated that the influence of certain local public figures might have been discouraging some workers from joining, and argued that, if this were the case, such individuals were "not worthy of the name of Workers." The report then turned to local grievances, referring critically to the foreman of Messrs. Kilpatrick's, who was said to hold a prominent position among the R.I.C. The writer claimed that little was known about this individual's background and suggested that the locality would not suffer from his departure. The article also expressed disappointment that the Kilpatrick firm, which had reportedly been expected to alleviate unemployment in Killarney, had not fulfilled these expectations. It noted that most of the work available consisted of a small number of local men engaged in minor tasks, while other positions were filled by workers brought in from elsewhere. Attention was also drawn to the actions of the chairman at a recent meeting of the Urban Council. The newspaper

[12] *Workers Republic 12/2/1916*

alleged that, at the expense of local ratepayers, he had supported a decision to prevent a working man from becoming a tenant in one of the cottages built for labourers. This action was attributed to the refusal of workers to show deference to authority, described sarcastically as unwillingness to "crawl on their knees to 'his majesty.'" The column went on to criticise what it described as the suppression of a doctor's report concerning an outbreak of illness linked to unsanitary conditions in an area referred to as Haggard's Slums. It suggested that those responsible might yet be compelled to take action and called for greater transparency on the matter.[13]

The '*Workers' Republic*' newspaper from 11 March reported on a labour meeting held in Killarney on Sunday, February 27th 1916, which was described as "magnificent" in scale. According to the account, Mr. O'Gorman, President of the Tralee Trades and Labour Council, travelled from Tralee to Killarney on the 9.30 a.m. train, accompanied by Councillor Partridge of Dublin. Mr. O'Gorman, who presided over the meeting, was reported to have expressed his pleasure at chairing such a large and significant gathering. The meeting, the newspaper explained, had been convened to strengthen the organisation of the working classes in Killarney and the surrounding districts. He reportedly remarked on the impressive turnout given the short notice. In his address, he reviewed the benefits of labour organisation and highlighted what he described as the "heroic fight" of the Drapers' Assistants of Tralee, who were seeking the observance of agreements and improved working conditions. The report emphasised his view that such efforts would not have been possible without organisation. After outlining several examples to demonstrate these benefits, he then invited Councillor

[13] *Workers Republic 4/3/1916*

Partridge to speak. The newspaper noted that Mr. Partridge received an enthusiastic reception. In his speech, he was reported to have criticised the tendency to label those working for Ireland as "Sinn Feiners." He explained that the term Sinn Féin meant "ourselves" and described its practical policy as one of mutual support among the people of Ireland, including the promotion of Irish industry, trade, and employment. While stating that he was not concerned with politics as a labour representative, he argued that labour necessarily became involved when political decisions affected workers' interests. According to the report, Mr. Partridge contended that the "only real practical Sinn Feiners" were, in his view, the English, whom he accused of dominating trade, wages, and industrial development to the detriment of Ireland. He also addressed wartime economic conditions, claiming that taxation had risen from four million to twenty-one million without protest from what he termed the "paid Party," which he suggested had failed to represent the people adequately. The article further recorded his response to a recent letter published in '*The Times*' by Sir Morgan O'Connell. Mr. Partridge was reported to have remarked that O'Connell, described as a descendant of Daniel O'Connell, represented, in his words, a low point to which that lineage could descend, a comment that was met with laughter and cheers. Referring to O'Connell's assertion that Kerry was "rotten with Sinn Féin," Partridge argued instead that the only evidence of corruption he had observed was contained within O'Connell's own letter, and he suggested that the class to which O'Connell belonged was the one affected. These remarks were also reported to have been received with approval. The newspaper stated that Mr. Partridge concluded by urging support for the Irish Transport & General Workers' Union, which he described as a purely Irish organisation, and argued that such collective organisation would provide

security for the future. He appealed to those present to join the union. In closing the meeting, Mr. O'Gorman was reported to have thanked the attendees for their attention and support, and to have expressed the hope that Killarney would become as well known for its labour organisation as for its natural beauty.[14]

In March 1916, the '*Workers' Republic*' newspaper reported that the "carters'" application for an increase of wages had come before the Urban Council at their last meeting, only to be consigned, in its view, to the waste-paper basket. It contrasted this with what it described as a lengthy and trivial debate on the "art" of shovelling by that same body, noting with evident sarcasm that a competition between two councillors was even to be held the following Monday evening. Admission, it remarked wryly, was to be via ticket, available at the A.O.H. Hall, with James Timothy - himself described as a "workingman" - said to have consented to act as judge. The paper went on to comment on the activities of the local branch of the A.O.H., suggesting that it had been rather successful in securing positions for its members, including, most recently, the appointment of a Recruiting Sergeant for the town. It further alleged that this individual had been the choice of a certain "Sir Morgan O'Connell," who claimed descent from the "Illustrious Dan" - a claim the newspaper treated with open derision, remarking that such an ancestor would scarcely have approved. Turning to matters of public welfare, the newspaper observed that it had been some time since a meeting of the local distress committee had taken place, and suggested that its members might themselves be "distressed" over questions surrounding the distribution of timber. It raised pointed questions about what had become of a balance of Canadian Flour received the

[14] *Workers Republic 11/3/1916*

previous year, and why it had not all been distributed, warning that, failing an explanation, it would publish the facts at a later date. Finally, the paper condemned what it described as a recent meeting of local capitalists, accusing them of acting to raise the price of foodstuffs once again. In its view, these "blood-suckers" had already extracted enough from workers, while still failing to pay wages sufficient for a decent standard of living.[15]

An issue of '*The Liberator*' reported on a meeting of the Killarney Trades and Labour Council, where Mr. James O'Shea, President, had occupied the chair. The following societies and unions were represented: Asylum Attendants, Bakers, Brick and Stonelayers, Drapers' Assistants, and the Irish Workers' Union. The minutes of the previous meeting were read and signed. Mr. Denis Lyne (Asylum Attendants) expressed his society's gratitude to the Council members for their assistance in supporting their application for a "war bonus" at the recent meeting of the Committee of Management. He assured the delegates that the Asylum Workers would reciprocate should their respective societies encounter any difficulty. While regretting that the application had not been successful, Mr. Lyne expressed confidence that eventual success was certain. He suggested that the reverse might yet prove a victory, as he believed it would serve to awaken the workers to a sense of their duty. He took the opportunity to urge workers to join their respective organisations, arguing that unity would make them a power to be reckoned with and compel employers to accede to their just claims. In reply, the Chairman observed that, regarding the Asylum Attendants' application, which had been brought before the Committee of Management on Thursday and ruled out under Rule 11, the Committee

[15] *Workers Republic 18/3/1916*

could have surmounted this rule if they were genuinely committed to the attendants' grievances, as other asylums had done. Mr. T. Horgan (Brick and Stonelayers) noted that the case had first been before the Committee at their November meeting, when Rule 11 was not an impediment, yet no member had been willing to give notice of motion on the matter. The application was renewed in February, but the Committee postponed it until the following November. "Live horse, and you will get grass," he remarked. He stated that the Attendants had again asked the Committee to reconsider their decision at the previous Thursday's meeting, as they found their meagre salaries inadequate to support themselves and their families. Rule 11, he alleged, was again invoked to save the situation. Mr. John O'Leary (Baker) commented that some public boards were adept at finding obstacles and excuses when workers advanced their claims. Mr. Tom Looney (Irish Workers' Union) advised the Attendants to strengthen their union, which he believed was the only remedy to compel justice from the Committee. He urged those he termed "slackers" to fall into line and do their share, rather than relying on others. Mr. Pat Cullothy (Drapers' Assistants) proposed the following resolution:

> *"Resolved that we, the members of the Killarney Trade and Labour Council, heartily congratulate Mr. Dan Rahilly on the occasion of his retirement from the Asylum service, and securing for himself a well-earned pension."*

Mr. James Wren (Bakers) seconded the resolution and wished Mr. Rahilly every luck in his future life. Mr. Denis Lyne asked to be associated with the resolution. While congratulating Mr. Rahilly on securing his pension, he sincerely regretted his departure, describing him as a loyal comrade, a hard worker, and a fearless

fighter. Mr. Lyne recalled that when the union had not been in a flourishing condition, and weaker men were wavering and falling away, it was owing to Mr. Rahilly's energy and great powers as an organiser that the branch was kept intact. He wished him God's speed and many years of happiness in which to enjoy his well-merited pension. The President, declaring the resolution passed unanimously, expressed the hope that Mr. Rahilly would long be spared to enjoy his pension. In reply, Mr. Rahilly stated that he could not find words to thank them for their flattering remarks. So long as he had the workers' sympathy, he felt fully compensated for any humble efforts he had made in connection with the Asylum Workers' Union. He declared that he had never had, nor cared for, the sympathy of the officers. He recounted that at the last meeting of the Committee of Management, when his pension was under consideration, he had asked after thirty years' service that three years be added to his service to entitle him to his pension, a request which was refused. He considered this very unfair, as he held a certificate of proficiency in nursing the insane, which he noted were not common in the Asylum, adding with regret that proficiency was not encouraged there now. "To my mind," he stated, "this certificate should be a special reason." He assured the meeting, however, that he did not intend to let the matter rest there. He again thanked them from his heart for all their good wishes. The meeting was adjourned at this point.[16]

The '*Workers' Republic*' reported in early April 1916 that, again, the Committee of Management of the Killarney Asylum had deferred the "consideration" of the married attendants' application for the War Bonus until the November meeting. In the view of the paper, anyone reading the report could see that the outcome

[16] *The Liberator 1/4/1916*

had been arranged beforehand, for it was not long before Rule 2 had been tabled - apparently to the relief of certain members, notably those who had promised to support the application. The newspaper suggested that there appeared to be a "ring" of fear surrounding these men once they entered the Boardroom, and yet the one individual they claimed to "dread" had been the only one who seemed favourably inclined towards the application. It lamented that its associate, Mr. O'Shea, did not display the same resolve when it came to defending workers' interests, arguing that such matters ought to be taken seriously if he intended to contest East Kerry at the next general election. The paper also expressed regret at the reported departure of Dan Rahilly from that specific institution, stating that his organisation would be poorer without him. In its opinion, Rahilly had been the one figure who held the workers together, despite opposition from the Superintendent and those aligned with him, whom the paper harshly criticised.[17]

Not long later, the following was also presented as the opinion of the '*Workers' Republic*' newspaper, reflecting its critical and often caustic view of local affairs and its strong alignment with labour interests. It reported that an over-taxation resolution had been discussed by the Civic Fathers at their last meeting. Mr. Eugene O'Sullivan had moved that it be marked "read," and was seconded by Councillor Davy Hurley, of recruiting fame. Later, when the Council had considered the application for an increase of wages from the staff, that slum owner, Haggard, had apparently thought he was treating the members to a great joke when he mentioned that Mr. Partridge was coming to town that night. No doubt, Peter - but had he possessed the "learning," he might have been an

[17] *Workers Republic 8/4/1916*

ornament to that august body. There were already enough prophets on that Council without him adding to their number. The paper went on to question whether the Local Town Steward, 'Billen the Boxer,' had procured many recruits for the A.O.H., suggesting that while he seemed keen on enlisting his own men, they were not responding at present. It remarked, with biting humour, that his "percentage" would likely be rather small by the end of the year. Turning to industrial matters, the newspaper reported that the strike in Hilliard's Boot Factory was still ongoing. In its view, Hilliard persisted in keeping the men out and refused to concede to what it described as simply just demands, despite his reputation in some quarters as a "friend of the workers." The paper argued that, if this claim were true, he now had the opportunity to prove it. Otherwise, it saw no reason why the workers of Killarney should not compel him to recognise his position and bring him to his senses, invoking the principle that "an injury to one is a concern to all."[18]

In November 1916, the '*Kerry Weekly Reporter*' newspaper reported on a meeting of the Killarney Trades and Labour Council, which was presided over by Mr. James O'Shea. Delegates were said to have attended from a range of trade organisations, including the National Asylum Workers' Union, Drapers' Assistants, Bakers, Brick and Stonelayers, the Irish Workers' Union, and the Carpenters and Joiners. According to the report, Mr. Bland informed the meeting that, since the previous gathering, he and the secretary had met with the Rev. P. Fitzgerald in relation to the construction of a new Technical School. He stated that Father Fitzgerald had received their representations favourably. The secretary, Mr. T. Horgan, was reported to have expressed scepticism

[18] *Workers Republic 22/4/1916*

regarding support from local civic authorities, suggesting that they showed little interest in matters affecting workers. He emphasised that workers were not seeking charity, but rather employment opportunities. The chairman added that a grant for the project had been secured nearly twelve months previously. The article also recorded discussion of the issue of a war bonus for asylum workers. Mr. Patt Culloty was reported to have raised the matter, noting that it had been brought before the relevant committee on several occasions. He expressed concern that, while other public bodies and employers had provided additional support to workers during wartime conditions, the committee responsible had been slow to act in this instance, despite the low wages of the workers concerned. The report noted that Mr. J. O'Leary and Mr. T. Looney spoke in support of these claims. The meeting concluded with the passing of a resolution, proposed and seconded by members present, expressing sympathy to Mrs. J. Horgan of New Street and her family on the death of her son.[19]

The '*Kerry News*' outlined in September 1917 that a strike at Killarney, involving fifty-one men employed on Lord Kenmare's estate, has now been brought to a settlement. The newspaper asserted that the men had handed in notice on 17 August and had ceased work on 24 August. It was reported that, in response to an application from the Irish Transport & General Workers' Union - of which the men were members - Lord Kenmare had stated on 28 May that he would grant whatever increase in wages the Wages Board might determine, such increase to take effect from 1 June. At that time the men were receiving 17s. per week. This arrangement was accepted; however, owing to delays in establishing the Wages Board under the

[19] *Kerry Weekly Reporter 25/11/1916*

Corn Production Act, dissatisfaction arose among the men. The newspaper further reported that, in mid-July, the Union again approached Lord Kenmare, resulting in an increase of 3s. per week being granted. This increase, however, did not apply to the men employed in the sawmill, nor was it backdated to 1 June, and it was understood to be in full settlement of the claims then advanced. It was stated that Mr. Houston, organiser for the Union, visited Killarney on 1 September and conferred with Mr. McCartie, solicitor for Lord Kenmare, though no definite agreement emerged from these discussions. During the strike period, the Union provided strike pay to the men. The newspaper recorded that on 8 September a special meeting of the Killarney Trades and Labour Council was convened, at which Mr. O'Connor, representing the Transport Union, gave a full account of the situation. After consideration, the Council resolved to request that a deputation be formed comprising Rev. Father Fitzgerald, P.P.; Rev. Father Dominic, O.F.M.; Messrs. T. O'Sullivan, M.P., J. T. O'Connor, M.C.C., and E. O'Sullivan, Chairman of Killarney Urban Council, together with representatives of the Trades Council, namely Messrs. J. O'Leary (Chairman), W. Bland, V.C., and T. Horgan (Secretary). The purpose of the deputation was to approach Lord Kenmare with a view to preventing the permanent closure of the sawmill, which was regarded as likely to cause considerable hardship not only to the workers directly employed there but also to those in allied building trades who depended upon the supply of timber. It was further reported that Rev. Father Fitzgerald declined to serve on the deputation, and that Mr. E. O'Sullivan was absent from home, while the remaining proposed members consented to act. Mr. McCartie was subsequently consulted, and he indicated that Lord Kenmare would receive the deputation, though on the condition that it consist solely of residents of Killarney.

On Saturday, 8 September, the deputation - comprising Rev. Father Dominic, Messrs. T. O'Sullivan, M.P., J. T. O'Connor, M.C.C., W. Bland, and T. Horgan - met Lord Kenmare and discussed the matter in full. It was stated that Lord Kenmare indicated his intention to close the sawmill but undertook to provide a written reply at a later date. On the following Monday afternoon, Mr. McCartie addressed a letter to Father Dominic outlining the terms upon which the men might be reinstated. In that communication, it was stated that, in deference to the representations made by the deputation and the considerations they had advanced regarding the welfare of the town, Lord Kenmare was prepared to reopen the sawmill and re-employ the men at the wages previously in force when they ceased work, with the understanding that any increase determined by the Wages Board would be applied retrospectively from 1 June, subject to certain conditions. These conditions were enumerated as follows: that the men return to work immediately; that each man sign an undertaking not to leave employment without giving three months' notice; and that all sever their connection with the Transport Workers' Union. It was further stipulated that, while no man would be penalised for participation in the strike, Lord Kenmare reserved the right to dismiss at any time any worker who failed to perform his duties satisfactorily. On 11 September, summonses against three of the strikers concerning possession of houses held from Lord Kenmare were heard at Killarney Petty Sessions. Counsel for the defendants applied for an adjournment, citing ongoing negotiations toward an amicable settlement; however, this request was refused by Mr. McCartie on behalf of Lord Kenmare, and the Bench, by a majority, proceeded to hear the cases. Under cross-examination, a witness for Lord Kenmare admitted that, but for the strike, the summonses would not have been issued. Nevertheless, on a technical point - namely, the

absence of proof that the individual who signed the notices to quit was the duly authorised agent of Lord Kenmare - the cases were adjourned. That evening, a meeting of the men was held to consider Lord Kenmare's offer. It was resolved that any settlement must not require the men to sever their connection with the Union. Subsequently, Rev. Father Dominic, together with Messrs. T. O'Sullivan, M.P., J. T. O'Connor, M.C.C., W. Bland, and J. O'Leary, again met with Mr. McCartie. Mr. O'Connor, organiser of the I.T.G.W.U., was summoned, and following further discussion, terms were agreed upon - subject to Lord Kenmare's approval - whereby the men would return to work on Wednesday at the increased wages previously in force; that they would be free to remain members of the Union; that any additional wages determined by the Wages Board would be payable to all men retrospectively from 1 June; and that, in the event of future disputes within a period of twelve months, three months' notice of intention to cease work would be given to allow for negotiations prior to any extreme action. It was also agreed that the summonses would be withdrawn. Mr. McCartie then communicated with Lord Kenmare, who assented to these terms. The men accordingly resumed work on Wednesday morning. The newspaper reported that they expressed their sincere thanks to the Killarney Trades and Labour Council - particularly Messrs. O'Leary, Bland, and Horgan, Chairman, Vice-Chairman, and Secretary respectively - as well as to Rev. Father Dominic, who rendered all possible assistance, and to Messrs. T. O'Sullivan, M.P., and J. T. O'Connor, M.C.C., for their support in bringing about the settlement.[20]

In January 1918, the 'Killarney Echo' reported that under the joint auspices of the Killarney Branch, Irish

[20] *Kerry News 14/9/1917*

Transport and General Workers' Union, a well attended meeting was held in the Gaelic League Hall, Killarney. Mr O'Leary, President of the local Trades Council, who was moved to the chair in a short address explained the objects of the meeting and dealt with the resolutions which were to be submitted to them. He then called on Mr. W. Bland, V.P., Trades Council, to propose the resolutions. Mr. Bland said that houses for the workers were badly needed in Killarney - the conditions in which the working classes were housed was a veritable disgrace. The Urban Council had powers and they wished for them to exercise these powers. With that end in view they intended to ask the Council to appoint a Housing Committee and to co-opt members of the Trades Council on that Committee so that a housing scheme would be formulated and set in motion as soon as possible. He continued by outlining that another matter that vitally affected the workers and their families was the exportation of Irish food-stuffs. He remarked that they had heard complaints on all sides. There was a lot of meat being sent out of Killarney, and the result was that when there was not a sufficiency of meat for the wealthy they bought up other food stuffs, thereby causing a scarcity and putting up the prices of these articles on the poor. Eventually if this state of affairs continued there would be nothing left for them to buy. Bland opined that the food shortage could be relieved to a great extent if the town workers were given a sufficient number of plots on which they could grow potatoes, vegetables, etc. It had been said that the plots already given were as a trial to the town workers. If they organised they could press for the extension of the scheme and get 3/4 of an acre. They intended to call a meeting at the Killarney plot-holders in a short time and form a Branch of the Irish Plotholders Union to protect their interests. Bland then dealt with the low wages paid in the building trades; considering the cost of living since the war. He believed the carpenters were

the only trade that received increases of late. He then proposed:

- *"That we, the Trade and Labour Council and Organised Workers of Killarney, request the Killarney U.D.C. to, at once, make arrangement to start a large Housing Scheme for Killarney. That we consider that sites having been got for Technical School and Library, it is gross neglect on the part of the Council in not having the work started long since; that we ask the Council to confer with a committee of the Trade Council as regards the number of houses to be built and the class of house required as most of the Council Houses are not fit for those they were built for and that artisans and labourers should get these houses when they are prepared to pay for them."*

- *"That we call on all Public Bodies in Kerry to take steps immediately to stop all exports of food from Ireland and that they at once start a scheme by which the worker can procure potatoes and other food stuffs at a reasonable price. That several other bodies in Ireland have already done so and that the Trade Council will give every help to put such scheme in operation."*

- *"That we, the workers of Killarney, promise our entire support to all these workers in the Building Trades who are about to agitate to better their conditions in the matter of wages, etc."*

Mr. J. Healy, Sec. Killarney Branch I.T.W., seconded and said that after the able manner in which Mr. Bland had proposed the resolutions, there was no need for him to say any more. Mr. M. J. O'Connor, Organiser, I. T. W. Union, who was received with applause, said that he was glad to see that the workers of Killarney were alive

to their interests and were determined that it would not be their fault if the slums in their midst were not wiped out and healthy houses provided in their stead. Personally he did not believe that the solution of the housing question lay in repairing and patching up the existing houses - what they wanted was to close them up altogether and provide proper, clean, sanitary houses at a reasonable rent. The Urban Council had power, and the Trades Council as representing the organised workers of Killarney would help to make them toe the line and look after the interests of those who put them in place and power. He remarked that the housing question, the food problem, and the plot scheme were all linked up with each other. They all hit, and hit hard, the workingman. The working-man was the nation's best asset. Without him, he remarked, there would be no prosperity or wealth. Though he built up the nation's greatness and the riches of the "well-to-do class," he himself was eating out a miserable "hand to mouth existence." He was denied a decent house to live in and the low wages he received made it impossible for him to obtain sufficient good food for himself and his family. They were face to face with grave possibilities in Ireland in the near future and he opined that they should wake up in time, if they were not to have a repetition of Black '47, which their ancestors died by the roadside of hunger, while food stuffs were being exported in plenty to provide rent for the landlord. Already, M.J. O'Connor continued, the pinch of hunger was being felt in the cities and big towns in Ireland. It was a vital matter which claimed the attention of all classes, especially the working classes, who felt the position most. The provision of plots for town workers had done a lot to ease the situation. The workers supplied with them were able to produce potatoes, vegetables, etc., for their families, but the number of plots supplied were entirely inadequate. He remarked that, in places where owners of land refused to let the

land for the purposes there was only one thing to be done, and that was to force the Government to step in and have the land acquired compulsorily. He explained that the Defence of the Realm Act, as some of them had reason to know, had very extensive provisions and one of them enabled land to be taken over at a price to be fixed by an Inspector, such as was being done in Dublin. At a time when the cry was for more food, they should make their voices felt and see that more plots were given, so that town workers would have something to fall back on. He declared that those who had plots should stick to them and press for legislation to have houses built on them and let at a low rent. He believed that what had been done for the agricultural workers, should also be done for the town workers. He pushed the view that these were only some of the things the workers stood in need of, and should strive for unceasingly. M.J. O'Connor stated that many of their grievances could be remedied by themselves, if they only utilised the powers they possessed. Organised into a strong, virile party, they could achieve many reforms. He asserted that Labour was fast coming into its own, but they needed to bestir themselves and be up and doing, always watching, and taking hold of every opportunity that offered. If they availed of the representation they were entitled to on public bodies and put in men of their own class to look after their interests, there would be no need for them to be calling upon public bodies to do what they were elected to do. They could remedy, too, the disgraceful, low wages which were paid by some employers in their midst. It was shameful, he believed, to have it said that unskilled workers in Killarney were only paid £1 per week, especially in such times of high prices, when the purchasing power of £1 did not equal its as compared with pre-war times. He remarked that the local Branch of the Transport Workers' Union had achieved much, but it would do more in the near future when it would

have every eligible worker in its ranks. Their success or failure lay with themselves; united they were all-powerful, disunited and disorganised they were at the mercy of their enemies. M.J. O'Connor concluded by asserting that there was a good future in store for their common country; it was for them to organise and unite in one solid irresistible body, so that they would have a voice in the shaping of the destinies of their motherland.

At a separate meeting of the Killarney Teachers' Association, the question of affiliating to the Killarney Trades Council was deferred to the next quarterly meeting.[21]

As documented by the '*Killarney Echo*,' a special meeting of the Killarney Trades and Labour Council was held in July 1918. Mr. W. Bland (President) presided. The following Societies were represented: Irish Asylum Workers, Bakers, Brick and Stone Layers, National Union of Railwaymen, Drapers Assistants, National Teachers, Carpenters and Joiners, Irish Transport Workers Union. The President (Mr. W. Bland) was unanimously selected to represent the Council at the forthcoming Irish Trades Union Congress which is to be held in Waterford in August. The ongoing dispute existing between the Electric Light Co. and their employees over the refusal of one of the men to work at a house in New St. was before the meeting. Mr. J. McCarthy attended on behalf of the men affected and gave the Council a full explanation of what occurred, regarding his dismissal, and the refusal of the other men to work, unless Mr. McCarthy was taken back. After some discussion, the President proposed and Mr. D. O'Sullivan seconded that the Secretary write to the Manager of the Electric Light

[21] *Killarney Echo 26/1/1918*

Company asking him to receive a deputation from the Trades Council in connection with the dispute.[22]

It was documented by the '*Evening Echo*' that, in mid-February 1919, members of the Irish Transport & General Workers' Union in Killarney, agreed a week's notice on their employers, which expired on Friday, and Saturday, demanding a flat wage of £2 and a 48 hours' week. It was understood that the employers were refusing to accede to this demand, which they considered extravagant, especially in regard to the number of hours' work. Over, day or evening over forty men had ceased work, with the number of firms affected thereby being eleven. It was stated that three other employers not included in these had acceded to their employees' demand. At the beginning of the week, the men out paraded the town in a body, and followed a four traders who removed goods from the railway station in their own cars through the streets. By the time of reporting, no outward incident had occurred.[23]

As reported by the '*Killarney Echo*,' a meeting of the Killarney Trades and Labour Council was held on a Friday night in late February 1919. Mr. W. Bland, President, presided. Delegates from the following societies attended: - Asylum Workers' Union, Bakers, Brick and Stonelayers, Carpenters and Joiners, Draper's Assistants, National Union of Railwaymen, Irish Transport Workers' Union, National Teachers' Association, Poor Law Officers' Association, Shop Assistants. Correspondence having been dealt with, Mr. W. Bland (President) said he was sorry to hear they were losing the services of one of their ablest members, in Mr. D. Lyne, Treasurer, who owing to failing health

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[22] *Killarney Echo 27/12/1918*

[23] *Evening Echo 18/2/1919*

was compelled to resign his position, which he so faithfully held under the Asylum Committee for the past 25 years. He desired to propose the following resolution:

> *"Resolved - That we, the members of the Killarney Trades and Labour Council, sincerely regret that our colleague, Mr. Denis Lyne, Treasurer to this Council for a number of years, has, owing to indifferent health, been compelled to sever his connection with the Asylum service, and we respectfully request the Committee of Management to exercise their discretionary powers when considering his superannuation, and add on the required number of years which will entitle him to the maximum pension, as the Committee have in his case good cause for exercising these powers, on account of the abnormal times we live in and also because Mr. Lyne was a very industrious, honest and conscientious worker; and we direct our Secretary to forward copies of this Resolution to the members of the Committee of Management of the Asylum."*

Mr. T. Horgan said it afforded him great pleasure to second the resolution, which he thought was a proper one. He had known Mr. Lyne for a number of years, and always found him to be upright and honest where Trade Union and other matters were concerned. He believed the Committee of Management will be only doing their duty by adding on the required number of years to Mr. Lyne's service, considering that he gave the best portion of his life in their service. Mr. D. O'Sullivan, Mr. P. Murphy, and Mr. James O'Reilly

having also spoken, the resolution was passed unanimously.[24]

In January 1920, '*The Watchword of Labour*' reported on the Irish Labour Party's first time contesting municipal elections. The party had elected three candidates to the Killarney Urban District Council (UDC). These were:

- Daniel O'Sullivan (IT&GWU)
- John Healy (IT&GWU)
- William Bland (Carpenters' Union)[25]

The '*Killarney Echo*' reported in early February of 1920 on the first full meeting of the newly elected Killarney Urban District Council (UDC). Outgoing chairman and former MP, Mr. Eugene O'Sullivan, presided over the meeting. Miss Breen proposed fellow district councillor Mr. Bland as Vice Chairman. Mr. R. Fitzgerald seconded the proposal, stating that there was no good in saying things about Mr. Bland. He noted that Bland was essentially a labour man and had been with them in the fight they had carried on. Fitzgerald added that they were out publicly and plainly for an "Irish Ireland," and when it came to the claims of Labour and Ireland, Mr. Bland had put Ireland first. He expressed his belief that Bland would be faithful to the promises he had given at the Market Cross. Mr. Bland was then elected amidst applause. In response, Mr. W. Bland thanked the council on behalf of the Trade and Labour Council of Killarney and on behalf of organised labour in Ireland. He stated that they were there to keep the eyes of their sons and daughters off foreign lands

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[24] *Killarney Echo 22/2/1919*

[25] *The Watchword of Labour 31/1/1920*

and to work for the freedom of Ireland, to which applause followed.[26]

As outlined by '*The Watchword of Labour*' during April 1920, in Killarney, Organiser Nelligan of the IT&GWU negotiated a 43s wage, 48 hour week, time-and-half overtime, and double time Sunday work for storemen, shopmen and porters, while carters got a 2s improved wage. Builders' labourers had refused 46s for 48 bouts and were on strike for 52s 6d.[27]

The '*Kerry News*' reported in July 1920 that the Killarney Trades Council had donated £16 to the Munitions Strike Fund.[28]

In August 1920, '*The Watchword of Labour*' ran an eloquent set of lyrics titled 'The Rebel Railmen' (set to the air of 'Are You Right There, Michael?') on the key role of the railwaymen in the struggle against the 'Black and Tans.' The first section read:

> *"Have you heard how the great British Army*
> *that sat in the trenches for years,*
> *Went to travel all arms to Killarney,*
> *To silence Republican cheers?*
> *They marched to the train with munitions,*
> *Reinforced by the bold Black and Tans,*
> *And the peelers of glorious traditions,*
> *With munitions piled up on two vans.*
> *And when they stepped onto the train,*
> *The Railwaymen sang this refrain:*
>
> *Oh! The sight there, the peelers, oh! The sight!*

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[26] *Killarney Echo 7/2/1920*

[27] *The Watchword of Labour 3/4/1920*

[28] *Kerry News 21/7/1920*

Do you think they'll be sitting there all night?
They don't look much like flitting,
And I guess we'll find them sitting,
All the night there, yawning, all the night."[29]

In October 1920, 'The Watchword of Labour' reported on IT&GWU progress in Killarney. Boys working in the local sawmill received 6s extra, as well as "good back money." A number of cases, involving non-union troubles, awaited adjustment by the local organiser, Mr. McGrath, on him starting his HQ there.[30]

'*The Voice of Labour*' provided a brief update on activity in Killarney in October 1921, writing that "Comrades" Healy and Shea had held the fort during the "dark days," but they were not resting now in their activism. The paper remarked that the "kingdom boys" were not looking back, and that the newspaper was popular in the area.[31]

In April 1922, an article titled 'Lord Kenmare as Milkman: The Cow May Run Dry' from the '*Workers' Republic*' explained that the employees of Lord Kenmare had demanded increases in their wages, estimated, according to the noble lord, at from 7s. 6d. to 10s. per week. Rather than pay, he had threatened to sell off his farm stock, and had warned the Killarney Urban District Council that, as he supplied most of the milk for the town, they might be left without any if his workers persisted in their demands. However, the paper quipped that the Urban District Councillors had remained somewhat philosophical, and were not at all alarmed at the prospect of his cutting off the milk

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[29] *The Watchword of Labour 28/8/1920*

[30] *The Watchword of Labour 9/10/1920*

[31] *The Voice of Labour 29/10/1921*

supply. In fact, some of them had even hinted that the milk was of inferior quality and sold at a profiteering price. In the view of the newspaper, such conduct exemplified the arrogance and irresponsibility of the landlord class. It argued, pointedly and with deliberate irony, that it was supposedly a great shame that a member of the old nobility should have had his “hard, honest” efforts so misunderstood. In reality, the paper contended that if Lord Kenmare could not pay decent wages and make his estate viable, then he ought to make way for those who could. It further expressed the opinion that the workers themselves were fully capable of continuing the milk supply and running the enterprise, and that removing Lord Kenmare from control would have been both justified and long overdue.[32]

In July 1922, ‘*The Voice of Labour*’ provided a brief update in documenting that the claims of ex-master Langford, of the Killarney Union, had been a long time unsettling, but they were subsequently told that the Clerk of the Union was holding matters up by not replying to the correspondence from the I.G.D.[33]

Writing on Killarney, a historical news article from the ‘*The Voice of Labour*’ in August 1922 reported that the association of "Heaven's Reflex" with sewers seemed incongruous; yet, though the average visitor never thought of the presence of the latter, they would have been painfully aware of the fact were they absent. The paper asserted that some improvements in the system, then being made, had led to a triangular "scrap" between the U.D.C., the L.G.D., and the Irish Transport & General Workers’ Union. Plans, prepared by the

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[32] *Workers Republic 8/4/1922*

[33] *The Voice of Labour 29/7/1922*

U.D.C. and carried out by our Killarney Branch members of the union, were first approved by the Local Government Department; but, owing to some slight necessary alterations in the estimates for same, the Department's sanction was subsequently withdrawn. As a consequence, work was stopped and a number of workers were left idle. Some "hidden hand" was suspected in the matter, as the work had been given to the Union Branch only after the local contractors' estimates had been found exorbitant. The article concluded that they were determined to see the business through to a finish.[34]

Of additional relevance to the area is when the '*Workers' Republic*' reported on 26 August 1922 that propaganda was well illustrated in an edition of the '*Freeman's Journal*' from the 16th of that month. Reporting the advance on Killarney it described in detail the shelling of the countryside with Free State shrapnel. Then, referring to the fire of a handful of I.R.A., it remarked "a number of children playing near a farmhouse directly in the line of fire had a marvellous escape when the Irregulars began the attack. Great indignation is expressed in the district at the action of the men who deliberately jeopardised the lives of these civilians." This was a display of the anti-IRA prejudice of the '*Freeman's Journal*' and showed how the '*Workers' Republic*' was opposed to the Free State and its military campaign in the Killarney area.[35]

'*The Voice of Labour*' reported in September 1922 that, in a striking display of labour unrest, workers at Kirkpatrick's Saw Mills took matters into their own hands, seizing control of the premises following

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[34] *The Voice of Labour 12/8/1922*

[35] *Workers Republic 26/8/1922*

prolonged delays in the payment of their wages. According to contemporary reports, the decisive action came after the mills were closed without notice - an act described as the "last straw" by those employed there. The workers declared their intention to continue operating the concern until all arrears owed to them were settled. The owner of the mills offered an explanation for the situation, citing the disruption of postal services and the suspension of rail traffic as factors that had prevented him from sending funds to Killarney. He maintained that these difficulties had forced him to close the operation, though he expressed willingness to allow the men to work a fortnight's notice. The episode, as recorded in the local press, captures the tensions between labour and capital during a period marked by infrastructural breakdown and economic uncertainty. It also illustrates the willingness of workers to resort to direct action when conventional channels for resolving disputes appeared to have failed.[36]

In October 1922, a newspaper account in '*The Voice of Labour*' reported that a workers' occupation in Killarney - referred to pointedly as the saw−mill "Soviet" - continued to hold firm. According to the "scanty" reports available to the paper, the men had succeeded in finding a ready market locally for their produce, a feat which the owner had previously claimed himself unable to achieve. The commentary reflected a degree of cautious optimism that the resolution of a postal strike would finally enable the owner to remit the substantial arrears of wages owed to the workers, thereby bringing the dispute to a close. The episode, with its use of the term "Soviet" - a loaded reference in the early twentieth century - captures the contemporary anxieties and sympathies surrounding labour unrest in

[36] *The Voice of Labour 16/9/1922*

the period, as well as the willingness of workers to bypass traditional management structures in pursuit of their claims.[37]

An article titled ‘Pig Headed Bosses,’ from ‘*The Voice of Labour*’ in December 1923 documented that a case of alleged labour injustice at the Killarney factory of F. Cade and Sons, mineral water manufacturers of Cork, drew sharp condemnation in the contemporary press. According to reports, a worker with six years of service at the factory sustained an injury. Following his recovery, considerable effort was required to secure his reinstatement, yet he was soon dismissed once more under the pretext of a shortage of work. Compounding the grievance, he was informed that he had been re-admitted as a "new man," thereby forfeiting the seniority and protections accrued over his years of service. Meanwhile, another employee with only a few months of employment was retained. The matter was taken up with the firm, but three letters dispatched from head office on the subject were, it was reported, completely ignored. The tone of the newspaper account was one of outrage, denouncing the company as "callous and insolent" and suggesting that such conduct warranted a "sharp and severe lesson." Workers were advised to avoid all goods handled by Cade's "like a plague," reflecting the period practice of using consumer boycotts as a tool of labour advocacy. The episode offers a window into workplace relations in early twentieth-century Ireland, illustrating the precarious position of injured workers, the contested nature of seniority rights, and the role of the press in airing grievances and mobilising public opinion against employers perceived as unjust.[38]

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[37] *The Voice of Labour 7/10/1922*

[38] *The Voice of Labour 15/12/1923*

In 1926, '*The Liberator*' reported that a Labour Party meeting had been held in Killarney town to campaign for the candidacies of Messrs D. Cronin and D. Murphy. Mr. T.T. Collins, the Labour organiser for the area, addressed the meeting and called on those present to support the Labour candidates.[39]

In April 1929, '*The Irishman*' newspaper (an organ of the Irish Labour Party-IT&GWU in the Free State) reported on a strike that, at Easter, town workers in Killarney, dissatisfied with the alleged failure of the Amalgamated Transport and General Workers' Union to act on their demand for the restoration of the standard town wage in the building trade, transferred their membership *en masse* to the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union. The following Friday, they decided that the demand - originally made the previous autumn and scheduled to take effect on 1 January - should be enforced from Monday, 8 April, and that non-compliance would result in a withdrawal of labour. The next day, several contractors agreed to pay the full standard wage. On Monday, building labourers employed by firms that had not yet agreed refused to resume work. During the day, further contractors came to terms, leaving only four small jobs, employing twelve labourers, on strike. Masons, plasterers and other tradesmen on these sites refused to work until the union labourers returned. That evening, the largest labour demonstration held in Killarney for several years enthusiastically adopted a resolution supporting the men's demands and called on the remaining contractors to follow those who had agreed to the standard wage. The meeting was presided over by Mr. J. O'Sullivan, Chairman of the Branch, who made his maiden public address. Speakers included Mr. John Murphy, former

[39] *The Liberator 22/4/1926*

MP, who attended at the invitation of the Branch Committee, and Mr. Cathal O'Shannon, representing the National Executive Council. Murphy's speech - an eloquent, witty and pithy appeal for justice and fair play - was warmly received. The Killarney Working-men's Band, which had not appeared at a public meeting since 1922, volunteered to parade through the town before the gathering and provided lively music, greatly appreciated by the organised workers. Over the course of the weekend, weekly increases of five shillings were secured for several junior employees at Messrs. Hilliard's boot and shoe factory.[40]

In response to a news report published in '*The Irishman*' concerning the transfer of Killarney workers from the Amalgamated Transport and General Workers' Union (A.T. & G.W.U.) to the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union, the Area Secretary of the A.T. & G.W.U., G. F. Gillespie, wrote to the editor to clarify his union's position. According to Gillespie, the reason given for the defection - namely, the A.T. & G.W.U.'s alleged failure to act on the workers' demand for the restoration of the standard town wage in the building trade - was inaccurate. He stated that the Killarney Branch had been formed the previous August at the request of unorganised local workers. Shortly after its establishment, the branch notified building contractors that a wage of £2 8s. 0d. should be paid from 1 January. Subsequently, an official from the union's head office, together with a branch deputation, met with local contractors. Following that meeting, the branch requested strike action. Gillespie noted that this request was made on 19 January. At that time, the approximately fourteen members involved had not yet met the six-month membership requirement and were therefore not eligible for dispute benefit. Nevertheless,

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[40] *The Irishman 20/4/1929*

the union was prepared to take up their case and provide financial support. However, it found itself unable to do so because, although contributions continued to be collected locally, no remittances had been forwarded by the branch after 12 January. Gillespie added that while it had been claimed locally that £40 had been remitted, the actual amount sent between August and 12 January was £10 18s. 4d. He maintained that had the branch complied with union rules and the standard conditions of trade unionism, the workers concerned would have received full support. Gillespie also addressed an allegation that A.T. & G.W.U. members in Tralee had worked below the standard rate on the Dillon sewerage contract, a claim he suggested had been used to persuade Killarney workers to switch unions. He stated that the complaint was already being dealt with by the Irish Labour Party and declined to discuss it further, other than to assert that there was a complete answer to the charge. He further observed that the success of this argument in convincing Killarney workers to join the Irish Transport Union was now being used to encourage Tralee members to do likewise, adding that comment on this development was unnecessary.[41]

At the Irish Transport & General Workers' Union's annual delegate conference, '*The Irishman*' reported in August 1929 that, welcoming the delegates, Senator Thomas. Foran, General President, said that the Union had now entered on its twentieth year and would soon celebrate its majority. In the previous twelve months, he remarked that the Union had again proven itself the most effective weapon of defence in the hands of the general body of workers in Ireland, and the delegates would note from the Annual Report that in many respects its activities had been more pronounced and

[41] *The Irishman 11/5/1929*

more widespread than at any period within the previous six or seven years. As evidence of that he referred to the number of old branches which had been reorganised, and the number of new branches formed. The new branches covered areas as far apart as Blarney and Birr, Urlingford and Ardglass, Ballinacurra and Tullamore, Camolin and Killarney. The Union's success in preserving hard-won wages and conditions had been an incentive to many old members to rejoin as soon as they got work again after spells of unemployment, and this tendency was so strong that regular reorganisation campaigns had been demanded in several whole counties. Ireland's trade and agricultural depression, he regretted to say, was still the outstanding feature of the economic position throughout the country.[42]

In September 1929, '*The Irishman*' outlined that at a recent conference of the IT&GWU in Limerick, C. F. Ridgway, Secretary of the Hotel and Restaurant Workers' Branch, was active in the Limerick hotels. Since then, he had held two meetings for the Limerick hotel workers, and excellent results had come from most of the city hotels. As in Killarney, these workers would be connected directly with the Hotel and Restaurant Branch in Dublin.[43]

'*The Irishman*' reported in November 1929 that since a recent victory in Messrs. Denny's firm, Waterford there had been much activity in several of the IT&GWU's Co. Waterford sections and after visiting Tralee, Dingle and Killarney, Frank Robbins was going on to Waterford to assist Secretary T. Dunne, for a time in strengthening the Union position in various jobs.[44]

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[42] *The Irishman 10/8/1929*

[43] *The Irishman 7/9/1929*

[44] *The Irishman 16/11/1929*

The 'Workers' Republic' newspaper (founded by 1916 Rising leader, James Connolly) keenly reported on workers' activity in Killarney town during this period.

Lord Kenmare, as he appeared in 1920, was a notorious enemy of organised labour in Killarney.
(Photo source: National Photographic Record)

IN THE MIDST OF DEPRESSION, 1930-1940

In April 1930, the '*Kerry Reporter*' outlined that some of the Killarney masons had gone on strike for higher wages. They sought to have them raised from 3/- to 3/6 a day.[45]

The '*Irish Workers' Voice*' reported in November 1930 how Mr. Philip O'Sullivan, of the Castlerosse Cottages, Killarney, successfully claimed compensation against the Killarney Mineral Water Manufacturing Company, under the Workmen's Compensation Act in respect of injury sustained on the 25th of July during the previous year, while in the course of his employment. The injuries were caused by a falling plank. The applicant was awarded 20s. per week and 75 per cent bonus; also £6 16s expenses and costs.[46]

In March 1931, the '*Kerry Champion*' reported on civil legal action taken by Catherine M. Reidy, a merchant at Main St., Killarney, against Jeremiah Murphy and fifteen members of the Irish Union of Distributive and Clerks and John E. Moriarity, Secretary of the Killarney INTO branch. The plaintiff claimed £1,000 damages and for an injunction to restrain members of the said union from wrongfully conspiring amongst themselves and with others to procure cause and induce the plaintiff's customers to cease to deal in her business, and from wrongfully procuring, causing and inducing certain of plaintiff's employees to leave her service and from wrongfully, by themselves, their servants and agents watching and besotting her business premises. Presided over by Judge E.J.

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[45] *Kerry Reporter 12/4/1930*

[46] *Irish Workers Voice 8/11/1930*

McElligott K.C., it was opened at Killarney Courthouse and hotly contested.[47]

The '*Irish Worker*' reported in July 1931 that a man in Killarney was paying 1s. 1d. per week for a cottage. However, he was £30 0s. 1d. in arrears. He was subsequently ordered to give tip his cottage. The paper quipped that instead of collecting the rent owed, "maybe the rent collector forgot to call."[48]

In September 1931, the '*Irish Worker*' sarcastically outlined that Mr. John Sheehan, of Dromkerry, Beaufort, Killarney, has been served with a summons to show cause why he should not be bound to keep the peace and be of good behaviour towards all citizens of Saorstát Eireann on the alleged grounds that he was found in possession on 7th of August of a document entitled 'An t-Oglach,' and another document entitled 'Irish Workers and Farmers' Party - Constitution and Rules,' the aforesaid documents being treasonable documents as defined by the Treasonable Offences Act, 1925.[49]

Reporting from Killarney during June 1932, the '*Irish Workers' Voice*' outlined how revelations of the poverty and foul housing existing locally were made at the last meeting of the Kerry Board of Health. Moving for the building of houses under the new Housing Act, Miss Breen stated that there were some awful hovels in East Kerry. In Brandon, she said that they had to leave the house when the tide came in. There were some blind pensioners there who had to seek refuge elsewhere at springtide, and it was a miracle that some lives were

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[47] *Kerry Champion 21/3/1931*

[48] *Irish Worker 11/7/1931*

[49] *Irish Worker 26/9/1931*

not lost. Continuing, Miss Breen said that recently a member of a family at Brandon died as the result of starvation. The Parish Priest who was called in to attend the boy found that there was not a particle of food in the house. It was absolutely necessary to relieve the distress there because it amounted to pure starvation. It was as a question of relief work as much as anything else that the housing scheme was being undertaken. The Chairman said that at Brandon apart from the unemployment which existed, the housing conditions were terrible. The houses there should be demolished instantly if proper sanitary conditions were to prevail. The Dingle and Killorglin districts were also regarded as urgent. The Board decided to appoint a sub-committee to prepare material for a scheme for the district. The paper asserted that these revelations, however, underlined the need for a strong Workers' Group in Kerry that would see that these conditions were remedied immediately and that there be no red-tape delay.[50]

In October 1932, the '*Kerry Champion*' documented that at a special meeting of the Killarney Urban Council, a tender was accepted for the erection of forty-six workmen's dwellings. The chairman stated that when erected, these dwellings would be let to workers at a weekly rent of 4s. 4d. Whilst it had been expected that the rent would be somewhat less than the amount stated, there was no doubt that this figure would be regarded as satisfactory by the new tenants, who were to be transferred from unhealthy and dilapidated houses, for which they had been compelled to pay exorbitant rent. The newspaper commended the members of the Killarney Council for the lead they had given to other councils in Kerry. They had been the first to grapple with the housing of the workers. Listowel

[50] *Irish Workers Voice 25/6/1932*

had followed their good lead, and within a few weeks, like Killarney, the people of the North Kerry capital were expected to see the commencement of the building of many new workmen's houses. The publication noted that it had repeatedly called attention to the negligence and tardiness with which the members of the Tralee Council had approached this very important matter. It was pleasing, therefore, to see that they were at last moving with the intention of supplying Tralee workers with dwelling-houses. At a meeting on a Thursday evening, the Town Surveyor reported that he had forwarded plans for his new housing scheme to the Local Government Department, and he was instructed to call a special meeting upon receipt of a reply from Dublin. The newspaper observed that the building of these new houses, together with the utilisation of the £4,000 grant in extending the concreting scheme in Tralee, would do a good deal to relieve unemployment in the town. It was only the previous week that many members of the Council had become aware of the large number of unemployed. Whilst the forcible manner in which it had been brought to their notice was very regrettable, the members were said to now realise the urgency of the problem. Still, when the housing and concreting schemes were operating, the Council - or rather the Town Surveyor - would need to give work to the most deserving cases. It was stated at the meeting that men with pensions, and some with two pensions, had been employed at the sewerage scheme. The newspaper insisted that those in receipt of pensions should be the last to be absorbed from the list of unemployed supplied by the Labour Exchange.[51]

In March 1933, the '*Kerry Champion*' reported that a sequel followed the complaints made at the previous

[51] *Kerry Champion 22/10/1932*

Friday's meeting of the Killarney Urban District Council when a meeting of workers and tradespeople was held in the Town Hall. Mr D. C. Counihan, U.D.C., presided over the very large attendance. Mr Hugh O'Connor, Secretary, stated that the purpose of the meeting was to organise the Killarney Workers' Union, which had slackened off for some time past. Those present were made aware of the disadvantages and big losses the workers had sustained as a result of that falling off. The men's wages on the Housing Schemes in particular had been drastically cut, so much so that workers had been forced to accept whatever wages they were offered. If they revived their Union, they would again have to secure standard wages. The tradespeople also had an interest in the question, as the Chairman would go on to point out. The Chairman explained that his interest in the question was confined to the Housing Schemes being carried out by the Urban District Council. His only purpose was to get the workers to collect together so that they could obtain the advantage of a standard wage. Some years earlier, a deputation from the workers had secured from the Council the insertion of a clause in Housing Contracts stipulating that standard wages should be paid. The present contractor had based his contract on the standard wage. He assured those present that there was no question of a fight or a strike, as the fight would be won if the workers stuck together. There would be no question of one man stepping into another man's shoes. Men were working for 32 shillings a week instead of the 42 shillings specified in the contract. He described this as a shame and stated that it was not Communism but Catholicism to get such a state of affairs remedied. He noted that Pope Leo XIII and the present Holy Father had agitated for State's Unionism on Catholic and fair lines. This question, he added, was one in which shopkeepers as well as workers would have a lively interest. It represented a loss to shopkeepers, because

no worker after drawing £2 2s. 0d. would bank it; rather, he would spend it on the necessaries of life his family required. As far as the Council was concerned, the interests of the workers would be safeguarded, but it was also incumbent upon the men to gather together and form their Union. He appealed to them to do so and pledged that, as far as he was concerned, he would do all in his power to protect their interests. Over one hundred persons enrolled, and the election of a committee was deferred to the next meeting in the Town Hall, scheduled for the following Sunday at 11.30 a.m.[52]

An opinion piece published by the '*Kerry Reporter*' in March 1933 reflects the perspective of the publication on labour organisation, religious identity, and national autonomy in the Irish Free State. The newspaper began by asserting that all sections of the community were entitled to form protective organisations, arguing that when such bodies were well conducted, they benefited society at large. Labour organisations, it contended, were essential for the welfare of workers, just as combinations among other classes served their respective interests. The piece criticised capitalists who condemned trade unions for excessive demands while forming their own combines to maintain high prices, which it claimed were often disproportionate to the actual cost of goods. The article argued that it should be the duty of every government to protect the community from extortionate prices and equally the responsibility of administrations to ensure that employers provided fair wages, while workers in turn gave a fair return for their pay. The piece then turned its attention to the Killarney branch of the Catholic Workers' Union, welcoming its efforts to operate "on real Catholic lines." It reported approvingly that the Union's

[52] *Kerry Champion 18/3/1933*

chairman had noted the support of past popes, the present Pontiff, and the Irish bishops for trade unions conducted on Catholic principles, and that he had seen no need for affiliation with other organisations, as the Killarney branch was capable of managing its own affairs. The chairman, Mr. Counihan, was described as a useful member of the Urban Council, and the newspaper expressed confidence that the Workers' Union would establish a record as creditable as that of the Council. On the subject of reciprocity between employers and employees, the piece acknowledged that some labour representatives had at times made excessive demands, which it considered harmful to the labour cause. It advised sensible members of such organisations to abandon this approach. A further concern raised was the association of Irish unions with England. Citing the Northern railway strike, the article noted that an English transport company was reportedly considering operating an automobile coach service through the Six Counties should the strike continue. It suggested that this would allow an English firm to profit from Northern Ireland's difficulties. While conceding that labour organisations might be stronger through international unity, the piece warned that British controllers of funds might prioritise British interests over Irish ones, a consideration it urged Irish labour unions not to overlook. Finally, the commentary also commended a decision at the annual G.A.A. Convention for East Kerry to cooperate with the Gaelic League in establishing Gaelic classes for every club in the region. It advocated extending this initiative across the county, presenting it as the duty of all Gaels to promote both the ancient language and the ancient games. The Killarney branch of the Gaelic League was praised for sending a deputation to the Convention, and

other branches were also encouraged to follow its strong example.[53]

At the end of March 1933, during a meeting of Killarney Trades' Council, Mr. J. Leahy, President, stated that if the use of concrete persisted much longer in the erection of houses, the trades of masons and plasterers were bound to become extinct. The meeting decided to send a deputation to the Board of Works to stress the necessity of building labourers' cottages with stone and brick in preference to mass concrete, so as to afford employment to the masons and plasterers. The '*Kerry News*' newspaper, reporting on the meeting, commented that it was unfortunate that road-concreting schemes and, latterly, housing schemes were being carried out with foreign cement. Where building stone was available in large quantities, it appeared to be false economy to resort to imported cement. The publication argued that if mechanics could not be absorbed in the national housing schemes, they would have to be maintained on the dole. What was saved in the erection of a house through the use of imported cement, it contended, would be expended on unemployment relief. The dole was abhorrent to the worker; he preferred work rather than maintenance at public expense. Unemployment relief was undesirable from many standpoints, and the system which favoured the import of foreign materials while craftsmen remained idle was not sound economy. Public bodies, the newspaper urged, should ponder long and carefully before deciding on the use of foreign materials in their housing schemes. It noted that it was the rise of the machine in American industry and the gradual elimination of man-labour which had helped to bring about present conditions in the United States of America. Labourers, carters, masons and plasterers, it

[53] *Kerry Reporter 25/3/1933*

concluded, would find ready employment in the big housing schemes through the use of stones from local quarries in the building.[54]

In April 1933, an editorial-style piece in the '*Kerry Champion*' argued against proposed strike action by local workers. The correspondent reported that there had been a possibility of workers on the Killarney housing scheme striking on the following week, and that the strike may possibly have spread to those working for other contractors in the town. The reason suggested for the contemplated strike was that what was known as the Killarney Catholic Workers' Union objected to contractors in the town employing workers from the country districts. The writer took a critical stance toward the union, stating that there was "evidently no question that the standard rate of wages was not being paid" and describing the union's policy as "rather narrow." While acknowledging that unemployed urban workers were entitled to preference, the piece suggested it had been the duty of the Urban Council to have included such a proviso in the contract, implicitly criticising the union for taking action rather than relying on the contractual process. The opinion piece went on to defend the rights of contractors, stating that the contractor in Killarney was entitled to employ any worker he desired, provided the trade union rate of wages was paid. The correspondent questioned whether the Catholic Workers' Union had been affiliated with any broader labour organisation and whether rural workers had held their own affiliations, adding pointedly that "those from the rural area were as good Catholics as those composing the Workers' Union in Killarney." In a direct appeal against the strike, the writer argued that local shopkeepers depended significantly on customers from rural areas and warned

[54] *Kerry News 27/3/1933*

that if they had relied solely on urban district support, "there would have been a good deal more unemployment in that town." The piece concluded by urging that efforts be made to prevent what it called a "rather foolish strike," arguing that it "could effect no good purpose, save to delay the erection of the workers dwellings and cause further unemployment."[55]

The '*Kerryman*' would report a few days later that, following a decision of the Killarney Workers Union at a meeting, demands were made on Messrs. O'Flynn and O'Connor, contractors of the Urban District Council Housing Scheme, for a minimum weekly wage of 12/ and that only urban labour be employed. The contractors, having refused to submit to these conditions, saw the men go out on strike and work was accordingly suspended. Mr. O'Flynn was engaged on a scheme of 16 houses and Mr. O'Connor was contracted on 21 houses.[56]

In May 1933, the '*Kerry Champion*' documented that after a strike lasting close on three weeks, the workers on the Killarney U.D.C. housing scheme resumed work on the full wages sought, 42/- per week. Several unsuccessful attempts at settlement were made, but the men's representatives refused to accept any offer short of the full wages. The local contractor for the project, Mr J. O'Connor, declared that he would pay the full wages, and Mr. Ring, Mr. Flynn's foreman, in accordance with his instructions, concurred in this settlement. The news of the settlement caused great satisfaction in the town.[57]

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[55] *Kerry Champion 15/4/1933*

[56] *Kerryman 22/4/1933*

[57] *Kerry Champion 6/5/1933*

At the turn of August 1933, the annual convening of the Irish Trades Union Congress (ITUC) was held in the Casino Cinema, Killarney. Mr. E. O'Sullivan, Chairman of the Killarney Urban District Council, in welcoming the delegates, said it was pleasing to find such a great congress held in Killarney that year and that they appreciated the compliment and distinction. Everybody who knew anything of Irish Labour, he remarked, knew that it never failed the country in its hour of need. Mr. J. Moriarty, Secretary of the Killarney Branch of the I.N.T.O., said he had great pleasure, on behalf of the affiliated unions of County Kerry, in extending to the delegates a hearty "*céad míle fáilte*" to the town of Killarney and to the "*Kingdom*" of Kerry. The President returned thanks on behalf of the congress. All the delegates stood when the congress extended its deep sympathy to the relatives of the late Mr. James Carr of Limerick, a member of the national executive. The President then delivered his address. Mr. W. Norton, T.D., in proposing a vote of thanks to the Chairman for his excellent address, said that it was one of which the delegates were entitled to feel proud. The Chairman had pointed out the appalling evil which capitalism had wreaked on the world. He had told them the price which the world had paid for capitalism. The world today was groping in the dark, seeking an escape, seeking an exit from the distress which everywhere surrounded it. What they wanted was not a mere adjustment of capitalism, but a new system of society. The world today was capable of giving the people a higher standard of living. As the Chairman had stated, once the elections were over, the Labour Party recognised - as the Chairman recognised - that the attack upon the nation by the imposition of punitive tariffs must be resisted, not merely by the Labour movement, but by the whole Irish nation. If this attack should succeed, there would be no such thing as political freedom in Ireland, no such thing as economic

liberty; the country would sink back to another Yorkshire and Lancashire, and Irishmen were not going to stand for that political status. If they were going to carry this economic war to a successful conclusion, Norton continued - if they were going to ensure for the nation freedom from the galling financial millstone which had been around their necks - it was absolutely imperative for the government to awaken themselves and realise that the nation was entitled to expect from them a more courageous leadership and more comprehensive statesmanship than it had received during the past eighteen months. Any attack which this government might make on poverty or unemployment, any effort it might make to strengthen the industrial and agricultural arms, the Labour movement would always be willing to co-operate in every possible way. It could not be said, and would not be said, that so far as they were concerned they were ever in the rearguard when it came to leading the nation to either national freedom on the one hand or freedom from poverty and squalidness on the other. Referring to dictatorships in Europe, he said that people, when they felt they did not have a mandate for doing things, had taken the new remedy of establishing dictatorships. They had seen the results of dictatorship in Europe over the past ten years. They saw how Germany was faring under a dictatorship. One would need to know Germany, or be in close touch with the people there, in order to realise the havoc a dictatorship could wreak upon the world's working classes. The whole trade union movement - five or six million people - had been battered. The funds of the trade unions had been stolen by the illiterate dictatorship. If dictatorship were any cure for Europe's political and social ills, they would have been cured during the past ten years. Dictatorships in Europe, he asserted, had not been successful. Norton also remarked that they had seen recently in the State the growth of an organisation which apparently, so far as its methods of

salutation were concerned, was going to be modelled on the Fascist type. "So far as the Irish Labour Trades Union movement is concerned," said Mr. Norton:

> *"We ought to say very definitely that no matter what form the dictatorship takes in this country, no matter who is at the head of the dictatorship, we will fight in the most uncompromising manner any attempt to destroy in the country the democratic political institutions which have been built up and safeguarded by the working classes here. The collective common sense of the Irish people and the workers in particular had been sufficient guardianship for the Irish nation in the past. We need no National Guard to look after our democratic institutions today. We looked after this nation's rights in other years and we looked after her needs in her hour of travail and anguish and we want to tell the budding dictators that so far as the Labour Movement is concerned we are quite capable of looking after this country's interests, this country's destiny and its economic and political institutions without having set up here a dictatorship, which, as we see it today, is heading towards holding this country for intoxicated militarism and soulless capitalism."*

Mr. P. T. Daly, in seconding the vote of thanks, said that the delegates had their ideals and he asked them to live up to them. There was no limit to the ideals of the Irish Labour movement. No limit to the claims they could make on behalf of their people. Their creed was that the land of this country belonged to the people of this country. Ireland was as dear to them as their fathers, they contributed their bit and would continue to do so. Senator Michael Duffy also offered the hearty

congratulations of the Congress to the Chairman for his address.[58]

Reporting under the heading 'Wage Cut Fight in Kerry,' the '*Irish Workers' Voice*' reported in 1934 that even "pastoral" Killarney was not free from the class war. Carpenters there, members of the I.W.C.W., were in conflict with Coughlin, the contractor for extensions at the local mental hospital, over wage rates. Coughlin was allegedly not satisfied with getting a "fat contract, and would not pay the county rate, 1s. 7¾d., but wished to pay 1s. 6d. an hour. Bro. L. O'Riordan, the secretary, said the Branch was determined to make him pay a fair wage. Next week, the paper hoped to give some startling "inside" facts about this contract.[59]

A meeting of the Killarney Branch of the County Building Trades Federation was held at the Central Club Rooms in February 1935. Mr. M. McCarthy, Chairman, presided, and there was a large attendance, including representatives of the Stone Cutters' Society of Cork. A discussion took place regarding an ongoing strike at the Killarney Mental Hospital new buildings scheme, and the meeting decided to await the result of the meeting of the Committee of Management on the 25th inst., before withdrawing all labour from the job.[60]

In December 1936, the labourers employed at the building of the new district hospital, Killarney, went on strike. They were demanding an increase in wages from

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[58] *Kerry Champion 5/8/1933*

[59] *Irish Workers Voice 7/7/1934*

[60] *Kerry News 20/2/1935*

£1 16s. to £2 2s., it was stated. Over 20 men were affected.[61]

In March 1938, the '*Cork Examiner*' reported briefly on an ongoing strike at an unnamed firm in Killarney, with a deputation of employees set to meet the company.[62]

According to a scathing article contained in the '*Irish Workers' Weekly*' from July 1940, the Trade Union Congress had met in Killarney, quipping that the holiday venue was seen as being in keeping with the holiday spirit of the assembly's leadership. It further observed that the agenda was notably free from serious "controversial" issues, which it attributed to the influence of the men of Head Office. The article argued that the Trade Union chiefs had been content to follow the restrictive policies of the ruling classes on both sides of the Border. It described this as support for neutrality in the South and support for the imperialist war in the North, characterising the situation as a "miserable" and "unprincipled" predicament. In its view, this had resulted from what it called a spineless and unprincipled officialdom that had diverted the organised movement of Irish workers. It asserted that there had been no independent policy or meaningful leadership for the people during the crisis, only limited protests and ineffective criticisms, while the nation's fate had been left to competing groups of capitalist politicians in Belfast and Dublin. The article also noted that it had published elsewhere a statement from the National Committee of the Irish Communist Party, highlighting one point in particular: that a movement from the rank and file of Trade Union and Labour organisations was needed to counter what it described

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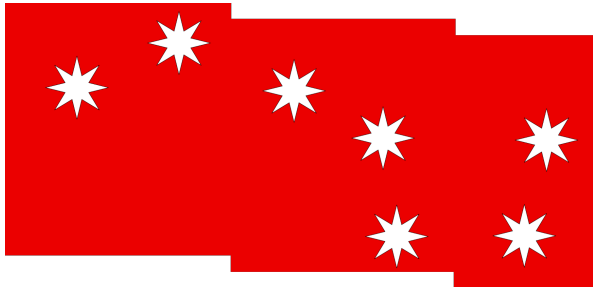
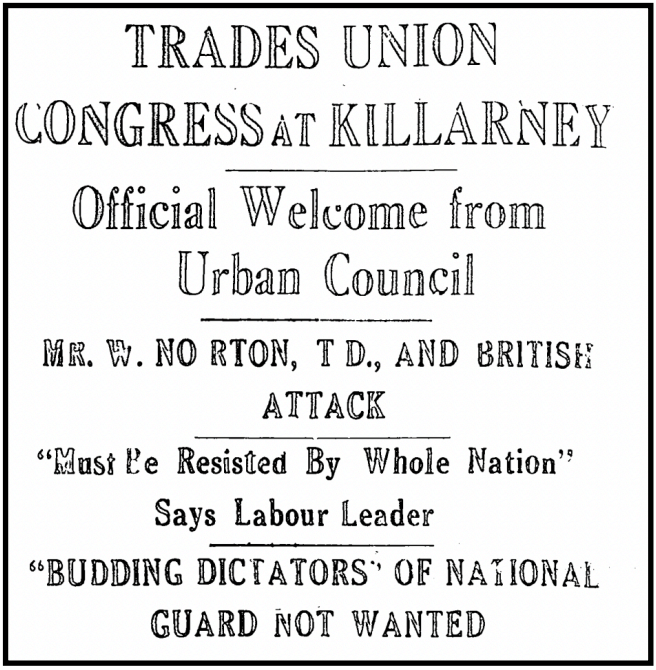
[61] *Kerry Champion 5/12/1936*

[62] *Cork Examiner 9/3/1938*

as the abandonment and betrayal of the working class by Labour politicians in the Dáil and their supporters at the head of the unions. The article maintained that this represented the unvarnished truth and that there had been no avoiding this conclusion for those seeking an independent and militant Labour movement. It referenced the teachings of James Connolly, arguing that a new leadership needed to be formed not from what it described as a stagnant bureaucracy, but from active and working members within committees and workplaces. It emphasised this point for a specific reason, stating that militants within the Labour movement had not yet fully recognised the situation and had remained strongly, even outragedly, opposed to the bureaucracy.[63]

[63] *Irish Workers Weekly 20/7/1940*





TRADES UNION
CONGRESS AT KILLARNEY

Official Welcome from
Urban Council

MR. W. NORTON, T.D., AND BRITISH
ATTACK

"Must Be Resisted By Whole Nation"
Says Labour Leader

"BUDDING DICTATORS" OF NATIONAL
GUARD NOT WANTED

The 1933 annual convening of the Irish Trades Union Congress (ITUC) was held in Killarney. (Photo Source: Kerry Champion 5/8/1933)

CONCLUSION

The history of labour activism in Killarney, as traced through the early decades of the twentieth century, reveals a sustained and often determined effort by workers to assert their rights within a rapidly changing social and political landscape. While the town may not occupy a central place in conventional narratives of Irish labour history, the evidence examined here demonstrates that it was nonetheless a site of significant activity, characterised by organisation, conflict, and, at times, tangible achievement.

One of the most striking features of this history is the persistence of workers in the face of considerable obstacles. Low wages, insecure employment, and poor living conditions were not unique to Killarney, but the local manifestations of these issues were shaped by the town's economic structure and social hierarchy. Employers, including large landowners and local businesses, often exercised considerable influence, while municipal authorities were not always responsive to the needs of the underprivileged and working class. In this context, the development of trade union organisation represented a crucial means of collective self-defence.

The formation and consolidation of local branches of trade unions, alongside the establishment of the local Killarney Trades and Labour Council, had marked important milestones in this developing process. These organisations provided a framework through which workers could articulate their grievances, coordinate their actions, and engage with both employers and public bodies. They also facilitated connections with wider national movements, linking local struggles to broader campaigns for workers' rights.

At the same time, the limits of organisation must also be acknowledged. While union membership grew during certain periods, it was not universal, and divisions persisted along lines of skill, occupation, and, at times, political allegiance. Employers were often able to exploit these divisions, and economic pressures could undermine solidarity. The fluctuations in union strength observed during the 1930s, in particular, suggest that the gains of earlier years were not always secure.

The relationship between labour and local government emerges as a central theme throughout this study. The Urban District Council was both a target of criticism and a potential instrument of reform. Workers and their representatives sought to influence its decisions on issues such as housing, wages, and public works, with varying degrees of success. The election of labour representatives to the Council indicated a shift towards greater political engagement, yet it did not necessarily resolve the underlying tensions. The persistence of complaints regarding housing delays, patronage, and inadequate provision suggests that structural constraints continued to limit the effectiveness of these efforts.

Housing, in particular, stands out as a recurring and unresolved issue. Despite repeated calls for improvement and the eventual construction of new dwellings, the conditions described in contemporary reports point to a prolonged period of neglect. The linkage between housing, health, and social stability was clearly understood by labour activists, who framed their demands in terms that went beyond immediate economic concerns. In this sense, their campaigns can be seen as part of a broader struggle for dignity and recognition.

Industrial disputes, including strikes and workplace occupations, further illustrate the contentious nature of labour relations in Killarney. These actions were often responses to specific grievances, such as wage reductions or dismissals, but they also reflected a wider assertion of worker agency. The willingness of workers to engage in direct action, even in a relatively small town, underscores the depth of their dissatisfaction and their readiness to challenge established authority when necessary.

The broader political context also played a significant role in shaping labour activism. The years surrounding the First World War and the struggle for independence created both opportunities and uncertainties. While some labour activists aligned themselves with nationalist movements, others remained focused on social and economic issues, sometimes expressing scepticism about the extent to which political change would benefit the working class. The subsequent establishment of the Free State did not resolve these tensions, and the continuation of labour disputes into the 1920s and 1930s suggests that many of the underlying issues remained.

The onset of economic depression in the 1930s introduced new challenges. Unemployment, wage reductions, and reduced demand for labour placed additional strain on workers and their organisations. In this context, the apparent decline in union activity can be understood not simply as a loss of momentum, but as a reflection of broader structural pressures. Nevertheless, the continued existence of labour organisation, and the re-emergence of activism in response to specific issues, indicates that the foundations laid in earlier years were not entirely eroded.

In assessing the overall trajectory of labour activism in Killarney, it is important to avoid overly simplistic conclusions. The history presented here is one of partial successes, ongoing struggles, and unresolved tensions. Workers achieved certain gains, particularly in terms of wages and representation, but these gains were often contested and, at times, reversed. The aspiration towards a more equitable social order - implicit in the idea of a "workers' republic" - remained largely unrealised.

Yet, the significance of this history rests not only in its outcomes, but in the processes it reveals. The efforts of workers to organise, to speak collectively, and to challenge conditions they perceived as unjust constitute an important aspect of Ireland's social history. In Killarney, as elsewhere, these efforts contributed to the gradual transformation of labour relations and to the broader recognition of workers as active participants in public life.

By bringing this local history into focus, it becomes possible to appreciate the diversity and complexity of the Irish labour movement. Killarney's experience illustrates that labour activism was not confined to major industrial centres, but was indeed a widespread phenomenon shaped by local conditions and experiences. It also highlights the importance of examining smaller communities in order to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the past.

Ultimately, the story of labour in Killarney is one of endurance and adaptation. While the challenges faced by workers were considerable, their responses were varied and often resourceful. The legacy of their efforts can be seen not only in the specific gains they achieved, but in the broader assertion of rights and expectations in the domain of class equality, dignity and respect that

continued to shape Irish society in the decades that followed.

The town of Killarney was busy with workers' activism in the early years of the 20th century. (Photo source: National Library of Ireland)

A POETIC REFLECTION

By Tadgh Quill-Manley (Ó Cuill-Maonlaí)

In Killarney's streets the people hear,
of meetings held and voices raised,
the votes recorded, brief and near,
and names that flicker, then are phased.

They note the rooms, the crowded air,
the plans delayed, the rents unpaid,
but not the weight of standing there,
nor what it cost for words being said.

The mills, the yards, the daily round,
the boots worn thin on stone and rain -
these pass in silence, rarely found,
between the lines of loss and gain.

Yet still those faces return again,
not out of ease, but out of need;
in quiet acts, again, again,
they held their ground in word and deed.

LARNEY CABINS . 3403 W.L.